

# Ethnicity in the Southern Provinces of Thailand:

## The Malay Muslims and the State

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### SYNOPSIS

This paper is an analysis of recent Muslim violence in southern Thailand and will place it in the context of a broader discussion of Thai identity, with reference to historic precedents and some examples of Thai policy toward its Malay Muslim population. The position of Malay Muslims has been complicated by international narratives regarding Islam. This analysis focuses on the way Thai government policies towards Malay Muslims in the south have served to exacerbate tensions and draw inappropriate parallels with Islamic conflicts elsewhere in the world.

### Introduction

In the opening scenes of the 2003 film, *Baytong*, (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr) a community of monks, sequestered in a forest temple, begin their day by performing the solemn, ritualistic routines of the morning: sweeping the leaves of the mango tree from the stone floor of the temple, hand-washing and dying their robes. The morning light suffuses the sequence in a gold sheen of contemplative silence. It is clear that we are in rural, Buddhist Thailand, and it is a scene which is found at dawn throughout the kingdom on any given day.

The next sequence of the film is set on a train pulling into a station. A woman is traveling with her young daughter. Hawkers are offering food and merchandise through the open windows of the train, people are disembarking and boarding, and the mood is light and cheerful.

The style of dress is markedly different from central and northern Thailand, with women wearing *hijab* and men wearing distinctly Malay costumes. This is in the south of Thailand, a place differentiated from the Bud-

dhist scenes earlier in the film. Suddenly, in a brief and startling instant, a bomb concealed in a Singha beer case rips through the passenger train compartment, killing a woman who had just been waving to some friends on the platform. It is the defining moment of the story, as it lures Tamm, a monk and brother of the woman killed in the attack, out of the Buddhist monastery and into the world in order to make sense of the violence that typifies what has been occurring regularly in Thailand's troubled south for the past several years.

The film is, essentially, an exploration of the conflict between Thai national identity and the nation's Muslim population in the south, particularly the provinces of Pattani<sup>1</sup>, Yala and Narathiwat. *Baytong* refers to an *ampoe* (a subdivision of the *jangwat*)<sup>2</sup> in the province of Yala. The film succeeds in its portrayal of the intricacies of the political and social problems in the south that arise from separatist energies that are the result of a long-standing identity crisis that has divided the Malay Muslims from the Thai Buddhists since Patani was a separate kingdom, one governed by Malay traditions and periodically either at odds with the Thai crown, or engaged in a vassal relationship with Bangkok.

The film is a powerful evocation of the elements that have served to undermine Muslim-Buddhist relations in this region, and which are predicated upon ideas of nationalism, identity, disparity and inequality. In addition, the film shows in great detail the differences between Malay Muslims and Thai Buddhists. For example, the muezzin call to prayer in the small southern town occurs throughout the film, in sequences which suggest the overarching community to which the southern Muslims belong and which have the same function as the carefully proscribed rituals of Buddhist devotion seen within the opening sequence. The film covers questions of conversion, such as a Buddhist Thai woman to Islam, so that she can marry the principal antagonist. And all this occurs as well as the complex relationship of cross-border trade at the Malaysian border with the political and economic realities of Thailand's deep south.

This paper will contain evidence of the complex nature of the problems in Thailand's south. It will demonstrate the ways in which the relationship between Thai Muslims and the majority Thai Buddhists has evolved in southern Thailand, with an examination of the limits that have been imposed by the Buddhist regime, particularly in areas of education, language requirements, and media influence. It will attempt to determine how these developments have shaped and defined the current conflict and what policies, if any, might be pursued by the Thai government to ameliorate the unrest, pacify the southern provinces and/or construct a progressive dialogue of rapprochement, despite numerous policy decisions that have resulted in continued apathy, resentment, and calls for insurrection.

The Muslim minority in southern Thailand, while of Malay origins and possessing a culture that is distinct from the dominant Buddhist culture found throughout Thailand, has recently become the focus of more intense international scrutiny, as a result of sporadic violence and consequent repression by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's administration. Muslims comprise 3.8% of a population of 65,444,371.<sup>3</sup> However, displays of violent discontent have not been the result of an international Muslim agitation fueled by Western foreign policy in the Muslim lands of the Middle East and Israeli policies in Palestine. Rather, they are localized expressions in keeping with ambitions that are restricted to Thai political divisions and

to the issue of separatism. Enmeshed with the distinct political ambitions of southern Malay/Thais are concepts fundamental to the differentiation of Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists: what comprises Thai identity, what policies affect or determine Thai identity, what is central to identity and political thought and action, and finally, to what extent does internal colonialism offer a viable way of explaining the Thai government's position toward the southern provinces?

However, unrest has plagued the south of Thailand for many years, indeed well before when the British divided Malaya along the current Thailand-Malaysia border in a treaty between Siam and Britain in the early part of the twentieth century. While this paper will explore the ways in which Thai identity has been formed relative to its Muslim population, it will also seek the fundamental reasons for the more recent violence and synthesize the connections to Islamic resurgence patterns in a global context.

## Approach

This paper will consist of an analysis of recent Muslim violence in southern Thailand and will place it in the context of a broader discussion of Thai identity, with reference to historic precedents and some examples of Thai policy toward the Malay Muslim population. As a result of modern political and social developments in Thailand that are unfolding rapidly in international media, the thesis stated here will be explained primarily in accordance with the disciplines of history and political science, and will be qualitative in nature.

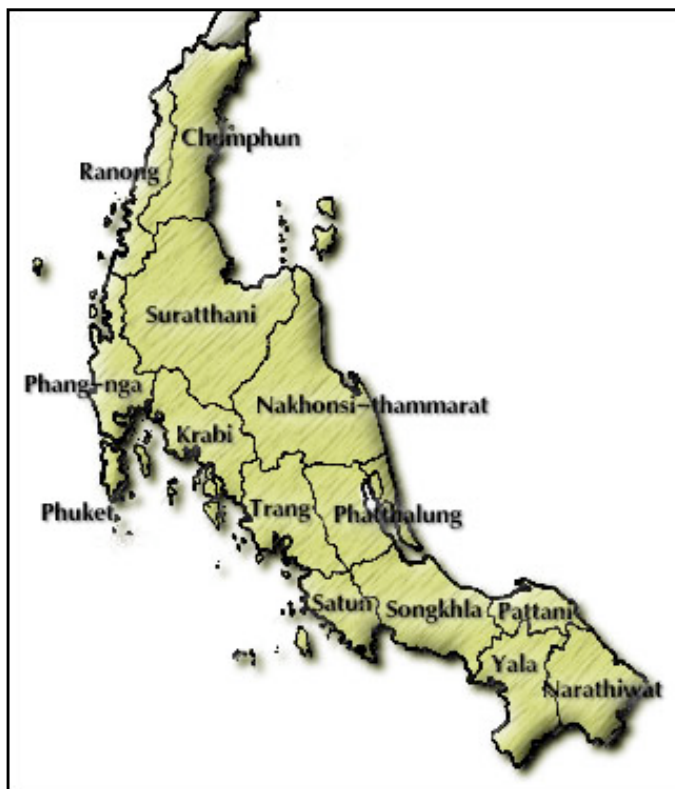
## Historical Precedents for Interaction between Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists

Siamese influence had once reached as far south as Terengganu and Kedah in modern Malaysia since the thirteenth century onward, and powerful kingdoms and subsequent sultanates existed on the Malay Peninsula well before then. However, the geography of southern Thailand, used here to signify its current "geo-body" as politically and internationally recognized, was essentially defined by the treaty with the British. This distinguished Malay territory from Siam in the vocabulary of the nascent nation-state of what is now Thailand by

creating a measurable border south of Patani across the Malaysian peninsula, demarcating what is now its geopolitical territory. The Anglo-Siamese treaty (1909) signified Siam's cessation of territory which included Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis to British control in order to preserve independence from colonial rule by pacifying the British. Similar treaties were signed with the French, including the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893, and the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1904, but in regard to Thailand's territory in what is now Laos and Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> These concessions at the turn of the twentieth century reified Siamese "national" identity in ways previously not "imagined" in the fullest sense of Benedict Anderson's text on the subject<sup>5</sup>.

These southern territories, which were ceded to Britain under the terms of the Anglo-Siamese treaty, were in essence sultanates, ruled in accordance with Malay custom and Islamic traditions. The region to the north of the newly created border represented the totality of the Malay-Muslim population in Thailand. And it is here that current violence, and an environment that supports separatist ideology and suffers from unequal resource allocation, as well as disparities in educational and career opportunities, have combined to create measurable problems for the central Thai authorities in Bangkok.

In his book *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of Siam* (1994), Thongchai Winichakul illustrates the ways in which borders were imposed on Thailand, not only in accordance with the terms of political treaties and in reaction to colonial territorial ambitions, but also in conceptual terms. The Thais' unique system of understanding territorial relationships was contrary to the advances of cartography in the nineteenth century. Complicating the picture of southern Thailand then, is that within the imposed nation-state of Siam, power structures were altered and along with them the "imagined" borders that segmented the kingdom from its vassal states. Authority was no longer conveyed from the king to his vassal realms (which had their own systems of recognition of authority and legitimacy), but was colonially determined from external pressures,



Map of the Southern Provinces of Thailand

(Downloaded from: <http://sunsite.au.ac.th/ThailInfo/TourismInThailand/south/>)

particularly British colonial ambitions in Malaya. Thongchai writes:

The territorial delimitation of Siam was much more complicated when a border was not a corridor but a frontier town regarded as common to more than one kingdom. A modern boundary was not possible until what belonged to whose realm had been sorted out. But the premodern polity defied such a modern undertaking. Confrontations and controversies over the question of what we might call 'sovereignty' over the Shan states, Lanna, Cambodia, the Malay states, and the left bank of the Mekong were critical to the formation of the modern Thai state and its misunderstood history.<sup>6</sup>

There existed in Siamese and Malay interactions a cycle of submission and resistance that began well before the period analyzed in Thongchai's work. Indeed, as early as the seventeenth century, the vassal realms that paid obeisance and fealty to the Siamese king engaged in protracted struggles that initiated the patterns that would remain in place from the pre-modern period until today. In an article describing the relationship between the Sultanate of Terengganu and the Siamese crown, Barbara Andaya notes that "attempts by dependencies were more likely to occur when a state was geographically distant from the overlord, especially if

the cultural ties between them were tenuous. Such vassals were also more likely to fall within the sphere of another powerful kingdom or to drift when their suzerain was weak.”<sup>7</sup> Andaya further details the use of coercive force by the Siamese to ensure that the tributary relationship by and between Siam and the Malay sultanates remained strong, but suggests here that geographical distance and cultural distance were mitigating factors in undermining this relationship. Indeed, cultural distance is one of the defining features of the recent resurgence in violence in the south today, and may be underwritten by the growing economic influence, rather than simply the military strength of Bangkok.

In addition to the case of Terengannu in the eighteenth century, the Sultanate of Patani, once a powerful commercial center and locus for Islamic teachings, was held in similar patterns of vassalage to Siam beginning as early as the sixteenth century. In an analysis of the pattern of tribute established in the relationship between Siam and the Malay sultanates of the south, Moshe Yegar proposes that the political and military strength of Siam determined whether the Malay sultanates, including Patani, paid tribute to Siam. He writes, “Patani provided Siam with forced-labor levies until 1564 when Siam suffered a defeat by Burma, and the practice was brought to halt. It was not until 1631 that the Siamese again received *bunga mas dan perak* [tributary gifts] from Patani. Shortly afterward, when Patani achieved independence, the dispatch of forced labor ceased until 1679 when it was resumed until the middle of the eighteenth century, along with other Malay Sultanates.”<sup>8</sup> Citing a military defeat at the hands of the Burmese in 1564, Yegar concludes that this is a time when Patani discontinued its forced labor levies. In effect, the pattern of tributary recognition on part of the Malay sultanates in the sixteenth century appears to have been influenced by the waning and waxing strength of the Siamese kingdom, but was mitigated by distance as well. Sultanates closer to Siamese territory tended to be more directly affected by its shifting fortunes and military power.

### Ethnic Politics and Thai Nationalist Policies in Thai History

It is within the modern nation-state of Thailand, then, that the Malays in the south, isolated as they are

from Malay and Muslim culture, form their identity against the Thai Buddhist majority. That identity formation becomes more concrete in terms of the Thai majority (which is Buddhist and has historically considered itself a subject of the Thai king). The minority Muslim Malays living within Thailand’s modern borders, whose allegiance had been to the sultans of their history, found that relationship now superseded by Thai “national” interests.

David Wyatt suggests that the reign of King Rama V, (King Chulalongkorn) marked the beginnings of official Thai nationalism with the introduction of policies that enforced and reified it. Primarily, religious and educational structures were introduced which in turn codified Thai identity in such a way as to exclude non-Buddhists and non-Thai speakers. Primary education became more standardized in accordance with King Rama V’s Ministry of Public Instruction in the countryside, while standardized script and language (Bangkok Thai) became the lingua franca of the kingdom. Wyatt writes:

With these religious and educational changes came the development of a new civic sense. To a certain extent it sprang naturally from the changes, from sharing in a common religious tradition and educational experience. Both constituted new modes of social communication, those means by which a society becomes conscious of its own identity. The schools, the temples, and the contacts with government officials—all reinforced the idea that all inhabitants of Siam were subjects of a single king, members of a single body politic. For the time being, these ideas were expressed primarily in hierarchical terms analogous to the old patron-client relationship that pervaded the traditional society. All the inhabitants of Siam – including countless non-Siamese, as we shall see—were now clients of the same patron, the king. Obligations once owed a patron were now owed the king: loyalty, obedience, taxes, military service, education, proper behavior. In return, the king owed them security, protection, justice, compassion, help in time of need, moral example, and so on. This basic idea was, in a sense, a compromise between the old concept of the ‘subject,’ stripped of the intermediaries that stood between the king and the peasant, and the modern concept of the ‘citizen.’ It combined elements of both, and the contradictions inherent in the combination remained to worry history subsequently.<sup>9</sup>

While the “official nationalism”<sup>10</sup> of King Chulalongkorn’s reign served to centralize Thai identity and codify it in real terms, the Malays in the south already

adhered to structures that served to reinforce their identity. They spoke Malay dialects, they had educational associations predicated upon Islam and the study of the Koran (the *pondok* schools), and they showed fealty to the sultan in a patron-client relationship similar to the Thai monarchical model. It was in the attempts to impose policies from Bangkok under the aegis of official nationalism that resulted in conflict.

During the reign of King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI), a rebellion broke out in the Malay south that was caused, in part, by new tax requirements in 1922, and in 1923. Because the resistance demonstrations assumed political and religious tones and were directed against policies imposed from Bangkok, and since these policies risked attracting British attention, King Vajiravudh redressed the situation by reducing taxes and requiring a new set of laws and regulations that took into consideration the role of Islam in the south. The period from 1923 to 1938, therefore, was a period of relative calm.<sup>11</sup>

The events in Thai history following the coup in 1932 that replaced the absolute monarch with martial law exacerbated the Malay situation in the south with the consequent nationalism of Field Marshall Phibun Songkram's government, which lasted between 1938-1944 and again between 1948-1957. Phibun's reigns as prime minister of Thailand were marked by a distinct revival of Thai national interest in the southern Malay provinces – a continuation of absolute political authority that had been mirrored in the monarchy. Partly the result of the external threat of Communism, and partly the result of the nationalistic mythology of Phibun and its accompanying xenophobia and paranoia, the Malays again became the target of aggressive nationalistic goals and policies.

For example, during Phibun's second government (1948-1957) in the context of the Cold War, the Malays experienced outright martial law and revisions in the relationship between the Malay provinces and the new military rulers in Bangkok. Wyatt summarizes the historical precedents for the current crisis in the south with vivid clarity:

While ideas of northeastern Lao separatism during this period may have engaged the fancy of a handful of politicians and Free Thai activists, much more serious developments were occurring in the Malay provinces of the south. The efforts by Phibun's government late in the war to enforce the

Cultural Mandates and to substitute Siamese for Islamic law had provoked serious resistance with strong popular support. The Khuang and Thamrong governments lessened the pressures, but new issues arose with the application in the south of the educational policies that had been aimed primarily against the Chinese—Malay schooling was forbidden. Malays in the south felt like subjects of an alien colonial regime and, in August 1947, submitted to the government a list of demands, calling for regional administrative, education, fiscal, religious, linguistic, and judicial autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

Phibun's heavy-handed tactics established a long-term pattern with regard to Bangkok's authority over the Malay Muslim minority. The history of this period is important, because it sets the stage for the conflict with Malay Muslims in the south at present. Wyatt further explains:

Luang Tamrong's government had promised the petitioners sympathetic consideration of their grievances; but Phibun's response on coming to power was the arrest and imprisonment of the chief Malay leaders in the four provinces and the outlawing of Malay and Islamic organizations. By April 1948, there was large-scale insurgency in the south, put down by government troops with massive force that included aerial bombardment. There was much sympathy in Malaya for the dissidents' plight, but the onset of major and predominantly Chinese Communist insurgency against the British Malayan government in mid-1948, impinging on the border region, required cooperation between the Malayan and the Thai governments and resulted in the concentration of much military force and attention in the region with Western support. This contributed to the isolation and long-term muting of Malay dissidence.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that Cold War mentality and ideology pervaded Southeast Asia, and that Thailand's reaction to Communists within the country, particularly during the period in which Communism was gaining a foothold from Vietnam across mainland Southeast Asia, also shaped its policies toward Muslims in the south. The apparatus, then, of a firm government policy that mirrored colonial administration (but was projected internally from the capital) became fixed at this time, under the umbrella of fears of nascent Communist movements.

## Integration versus Separatism: Factors of Integration as Defined by Thai Policy

The policies that are favored by the Thai administration with regard to Muslims in the south of Thailand have all been tailored toward accommodating and incorporating the southern provinces into a homogenized and centralized Thai identity. To this end, the policies have centered around four major elements: the use of national media to broadcast Thai national ideology and programming, an educational policy that includes Thai language instruction and nationalist history, offers of development incentives and aid packages to bring economic levels up to national parity, and the use of police and military pressure to ensure compliance with policy. Unfortunately, these approaches have been all historically fraught with problems and fail to take into account the disparate approaches to culture-based systems of knowledge and self-identity between Malay and Thai nationalisms.

### *The Use of Media*

The media plays a central role in legitimizing nationalistic identity programs and communicating such identity across various ethnic lines in Thailand. In an interesting study, Annette Hamilton looked at the ways in which Thai media is broadcast to the south as a way of reinforcing Thai identity. It is but one of the tools that the Thai government has employed to ensure that the Malays in the southern provinces begin to see themselves as Thais primarily. Indeed, the inherent flaws in this policy are in keeping with Benedict Anderson's view of national identity formation in the first place – that it is delimited by rhetorical ambiguities and is transmitted via print-capital. For example, Hamilton writes:

In the case of the Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand, the emergence and transformation of their own distinctive local cultures cannot be mapped by the existence of either national or transnational media environments. What it is to be a person in that space and time is constructed from historical memory and the negotiation of an everyday life-world and the values placed on local practices of distinction, rather than from a hegemonic national community, imagined, or imaginary, let alone one encountered only on television.<sup>14</sup>

As a policy, the media fails to articulate Thai identity to Malays in the south because it does not take into account the complexities of ethnic identity formation, and that national identity is defined through Buddhism and the Thai language. In addition, it underestimates or simply discredits the strengths of existing institutions in the south, particularly those that are most successful in resisting proposals from the government, e.g., secularization, modernization and linguistic mandates. The hegemonic Thai identity seeks to consolidate minority groups within its dictated vision of itself by way of inducement, media projection and, failing these methods, military and police force. Indeed, in Hamilton's research, she found that Thailand's policy communicated by way of national media has had little effect on the "hearts and minds" of Muslims in the south. She writes:

There has, however, been consistent resistance from Muslims in the south embracing Thai television, something which the Thais find both amusing and infuriating. One very famous story, constantly told to me during my fieldwork, concerned the role of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army (the Southern Region) in encouraging television viewing during the early 1980s. This very powerful and important segment of the national security forces was detailed to deliver free television sets to villages across Yala province. They drove in with their vehicles loaded with television sets and technicians, who were supposed to set them up in the houses of village headmen and other local leaders, including religious leaders. But the villagers refused and insisted they did not want television sets. They loaded them back onto the trucks and the 5<sup>th</sup> Army was obliged to take them away again. The principle point of this story, from the Thai teller's view, was that Muslims were demonstrably stupid; if they did not want the free television sets, at least they could have accepted them and then sold them later for a profit.<sup>15</sup>

The Muslims' resistance to the television sets is a remarkable example of the ways cultural resistance has functioned in the south. But the anecdote also reveals much about Thai-Buddhist attitudes toward, and perceptions of, Muslims. The Malays of the south had little need for Thai television, since they speak a different language, share a distinct cultural "thought-world," and rely on traditional forms of education and religious development. The free televisions were intended to serve Thai nationalist purposes but were incongruent with Malay-Muslim traditions and religious strictures which viewed television consumption as sinful. The

anecdote also reveals the disparity in the value systems between Muslims and Buddhists. Because the Muslims did not keep the televisions and re-sell them, they were deemed “stupid” by this person (presumably, a Thai Buddhist and pragmatist) who told the story.

Multi-media is a powerful new tool in the arsenal of nationalist policy. Benedict Anderson writes that “advances in communications technology, especially radio and television, give print allies unavailable a century ago. Multinational broadcasting can conjure up the imagined community to illiterates and populations with different mother-tongues.”<sup>16</sup> He further adds that “above all, the very idea of ‘nation’ is now nestled firmly in virtually all print-languages; and nation-ness is virtually inseparable from political consciousness.”<sup>17</sup>

However, if the media plays a central role in transmitting Thai nationalist ideology to the Muslim southern provinces, it is also used extensively throughout the south to report news from the greater Islamic world about international Muslim issues. And it is this phenomenon of fairly recent occurrence that has brought the Thai Muslim dilemma to the forefront of international consciousness.

In a brief sketch about how Muslims in the south perceive themselves in the broader context of international Islam, Chaiwat Satha-Anand analyzed Thailand’s Malay Muslim “worldview” as evidenced in the pages of independent Muslim magazines and newspapers he read within a discrete period of time. He writes that “the Thai Muslims’ perception of the world can be properly understood on the basis of three important and interconnected factors: the power of the contemporary Islamic resurgence; the proximity of Thailand, especially the four southernmost provinces, to Malaysia; and the ethnic origins of Muslims in Thailand.”<sup>18</sup> Chaiwat recognizes that external forces, most notably stories channeled through the Islamic media about Muslims elsewhere, are significant contributions to the ways in which Muslims in the south are able to maintain separatism, despite the efforts of Thai media to contain it or drown it out entirely.

## Education

Historically, one of the major pillars of government policy toward Muslims in the south of Thailand has been the imposition of Thai-based curriculum and language instruction in public schools. It is no surprise

then, that recent violence against the Thai state has been directed at Thai schoolteachers or toward the schools themselves. The Thai educational policy is predicated on the mission of providing Thai language instruction as a primary way of conveying notions of identity to the minority community in the south. However, this institution, like others that have roots in policy formation and official nationalism, has a long history.

For the colonial powers of Southeast Asia, educational policy contributed to an “Indochinese” consciousness, particularly among the French-administered colonies in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, of which the legacy may be seen in the interplay between Thai centralized educational motivations and the Malay systems in place in Thailand’s southern provinces. One objective of colonial educational policies was to “break existing politico-cultural ties between the colonized peoples and the immediate extra-Indochinese world.”<sup>19</sup> When viewed in the context of the south of Thailand, the policies of the central Thai government seem to differ little in intent from their colonial precedents, a factor which has supported the claims of “internal colonialism.”

For the most part, Malay Muslim education in the south of Thailand is centered around the *pondok* system. The *pondok* is a religious school that transmits Islamic education via Malay language and Muslim instruction. It has historic and cultural precedents based in Malaysia, with which southern Malays in Thailand share obvious cultural, linguistic and religious affinities. However, since the early 1970s the Thai government has constructed new Thai-based schools and sought to extend improved educational opportunities to Thai Muslims with a corresponding improvement in standards. The tampering with traditional Malay forms of religious instruction has had a tremendous effect on Malay sensibilities and has contributed significantly to resentment in the region.

Interestingly, educational policy as instituted by the Thai government is bound to the notion of modernization. That is, nationalistic educational policies seek to secularize, in general, where there had previously been religious affiliation. The conflict between Islam and modernity is certainly not new, but it is an additional element that exacerbates the tensions generated by Thai government policies among the Muslims who are forced to accept them.

The lynchpin of educational reform throughout the south is language. The Thai government for many years has sought to enforce educational reform policies that disregarded the importance of the Malay language in the south and that attempted to impose Thai language requirements, particularly within the *pondok* system.

In an essay by Raymond Scupin regarding the educational policies aimed at fundamentally altering the religious nature of the *pondok*, he writes:

In 1961, the Ministry of Education initiated a plan to regulate further the *pondoks*. A research and coordinating center was established in Yala in order to secularize the *pondoks* and introduce Thai language instruction, policies which were embedded in the strategy of *patanakorn*.<sup>20</sup> The curriculum was restructured for the *pondok*, and by the end of 1970, there were 463 *pondoks* in the South which were formally incorporated into the Thai government program. The textbooks were in the Thai language and the curriculum included geography, Thai history, Malay language (although eventually the Malay language was taken out of the curriculum), arithmetic, and Buddhist ethics.<sup>21</sup>

Here, we have clear evidence of the ways in which the *pondok* system has been compromised by the nationalist policies of the Thai government program. While the intent is to “secularize” the *pondok* schools and to eliminate the Malay language from the curriculum, the program nonetheless substitutes Islamic ethics with coursework in Buddhist ethics – hardly a secular replacement. Fundamental to Muslim identity formation in the south is the use of education as a means of conveying important information about Islam as practiced in its Southern Thai context; and government policies that aim to reconfigure or eliminate such aspects of education diminish the importance of the Malay Muslim culture in the south and force alliances with Muslim interests outside of the Southeast Asian world.

However, policy initiatives in the southern provinces are not implemented without reaction, either explicitly expressed or passively resisted. This is a consistent pattern: the Thai government enacts policies that aim to diminish the strengths of traditional systems of governance that have been in place in the south for centuries, and the Muslims in turn find ways to circumvent, resist or simply ignore such policies. Scupin explains:

In general the response of the *To Khrus* and *ulama* to these new educational policies has been a re-

strained participation. To preserve the study of Islam, they have complied with most of the new government regulations, but they have tried to emphasize Islamic teachings and reject much of the secular courses. This trend has led Thai authorities to establish systems of incentives and rewards and financial support to those *pondoks* which adopt secularization. This policy has had mixed results. One the one hand many of the larger *pondoks* have received awards and financial support from Thai authorities. On the other hand many Malay Muslim parents send their children to those *pondoks* who teach only Islamic subjects or send them abroad to other Islamic countries and regions for education.<sup>22</sup>

If the political integration of southern Thailand is one of the goals of national educational policies, including their insistence on Thai language instruction and secularized reform of traditional modes of education, it is discouraging that the policies have had the opposite effect. Resistance has been an effective means for Malay Muslims to preserve traditional forms of religious instruction, as well as the Malay language, which is used in virtually all other situations of day to day life, excluding the Thai-mandated public school curriculum.

The impetus to send children to other Islamic countries, neighboring or otherwise, only serves to divide the Muslims further from the Thai nation and to encourage Thai Muslims to view themselves as part of a more potent, larger community outside of Thailand. Although the Thai government has put in place incentive schemes and various development programs, these may have tended to devalue the autochthonous system and create economic inequities that are often insurmountable. Economic disparity is one of the major reasons for rejecting the Thai educational program, even though this affords the possibility of acceptance into a state university and thus better career opportunities.

While the economic disparity between Muslims in the southern provinces and those living in major urban areas in the central part of the country are significant, it is not possible here to delineate the ways in which economic differences function in the discussion of this relationship. However, briefly stated, the economy of the south, long tied to agrarian and fishing industries, has essentially dried up, due to the introduction of synthetic rubber on internationally dependent commodity markets destroying the profitability of rubber plantations (which were previously found throughout



the south and the Malay Peninsula in abundance); and to over-fishing taxing the natural resources of the seas that surround the peninsula. In short, the economic situation of the Muslim population in the south, particularly when compared to that of central Thailand, further exacerbates feelings of resentment and harassment and complicates the nature of the separatist movement. It also diminishes any potential for the success of national educational policies which make it extraordinarily difficult for Malay-speakers to succeed in university entrance exams, which are conducted in Thai.

### ***The Use of Violence and the Thai Military Response***

The final element that has contributed most obviously to the pattern of action and reaction established by ill-defined and ill-conceived policies emanating from Bangkok is the reliance on the military to ensure compliance and to suppress rebellion. Onerous policies have resulted in the establishment of resistance groups whose agenda is defined by acts of rebellion or "terrorism" against the Thai state. The groups are various, with names designating and implying unity of purpose, but are localized and, relative to the Thai military, weak.

Nonetheless, the rebellion in the south has been a more serious national security concern since January of 2004, when the government officially initiated broad security measures in the most troublesome provinces by placing them under martial law following a series of well-coordinated attacks against military and police facilities. In addition, eighteen schools were attacked and burned to the ground in January as well, indicating that the rebellion, which was once characterized by sporadic acts of banditry without organization, had developed increasingly complex ways of using violence to attack the centers of Thai authority in the provinces, and to attract international attention to cultural and social problems in the south of Thailand.

The resistance organizations in southern Thailand have historical precedents and important connections to Malaysia. However, the chief objective of these resistance groups seems to be a reunion with Malaysia, rather than the creation of an independent and separate state. There are three guerilla movements associated with the armed resistance in the south: the Barisan

Revolusi Nasional (BRN), the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP), the United Front for the Independence of Patani (BERSATU), and the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO). Of the four, PULO has the distinction of being supported by outside groups in the Middle East and Pakistan. It purports to have a membership that includes 10,000 guerillas and its activities have included sporadic violence from the 1980s onwards, mostly targeting police buildings and public utilities. In addition, it claimed responsibility for an assassination attempt on the life of the King of Thailand in 1977 during his visit to Yala Province.<sup>23</sup>

Generally, however, the resistance groups that have dominated the political equation in the southern provinces are irredentist in nature. They seek to reaffirm the ethnic and cultural heritage of Malay Muslims in the south with their ethnic cognate groups in Malaysia, and to throw off the yoke of Thai nationalistic ideology and official policy. However, one scholar has recently put forth the intriguing theory that the rebellion in the south may in fact be a millenarian revolt. In an article published recently, Nidhi Aeusrivongse maintains that the participants in the recent fulmination of hostility are predominantly rural, poor and lacking a cogent plan to achieve a separate state status or independence. He argues that the resistance does little to attract sympathy for the Malay Muslims themselves, and that even less religious substance informs the rebellion. He writes:

Even if the militants and their movement (including organizations that supported them, such as PULO) may have wanted to establish an independent Patani state, up until 28 April these organizations had done nothing to make such a political separation practically viable under the prevailing conditions in the world today. There has been no serious attempt to gain the recognition, understanding, and sympathy of the world's superpowers for a new, would-be political entity. There has not even been any dissemination to the outside world of the sufferings of the Melayu Muslim people under the rule of the Thai Buddhist State.<sup>24</sup>

Nidhi's argument here is compelling, but it fails to take into consideration the fact that the Thai government's handling of the events that took place on April 28, 2004 arguably did more to publicize the plight of the Muslims in the south than any of the coordinated efforts of resistance groups in the past. Indeed, the images of Muslims massacred at a mosque signaled to

the world the intent of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's administration regarding internal security issues, and the gravity of his commitment to stability at any costs.

On April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004,<sup>25</sup> an uprising occurred in three southern provinces, with participation by mostly young men wielding knives and machetes who attacked police stations and official military outposts. The violence was extraordinary in its size and scope. The brunt of the battle occurred in and around the Krue-Se Mosque in Yala Province. The military reacted by opening fire and killing nearly 110 of the rebels, many of whom had sought refuge in the mosque. A total of five policemen died in the attack. The media coverage of the event was extensive, with international media subsequently drawing parallels to the plight of the Palestinians in the Middle East. As significant and deadly as this eruption of violence had been, it had nonetheless brought worldwide attention to what in essence had been a localized conflict. For the most part, this attention has been unwelcome to the Thais, who, rather than adopt a more conciliatory or compromising approach to the southern provinces, have since maintained an aggressive stance toward them.

A second major episode in recent events of southern Thailand is equally demonstrative of the accelerating nature of the rebellion. On October 25, 2004, a mass demonstration occurred in Tak Bai, a district in Narathiwat province, when protestors demanded the release of six men accused of providing weapons to Muslim separatists. Military officials said the protest crowds numbered from 1,500 to 2,000 people. In an effort to quash the demonstration, the military rounded up the participants, by some counts as many as 1,300. In the ensuing arrests, 78 detainees died, apparently suffocating to death after they were bound, gagged and stacked atop each other in military transport vehicles. The images that were broadcast around the world were indeed disturbing, and it seems that the Thai government, in its treatment of its citizens in the south, has reached a level of military reaction that essentially guarantees continued resistance and rebellion in the region.

If it is true that Islam informs the activities of the rebels, then is the rebellion necessarily a religious expression of dissatisfaction? Nihdi claims that the Muslims in the south lack a codified ideology that could sustain a separate Pattani state. He believes that the image of a glorious Pattani has no basis in reality what-

soever and that the vision that rebels purport to advance is but a fantasy. Nihdi writes:

Amidst this absence of ideology, the Kreuse mosque became the only tangible cultural symbol for the villagers. The attempt to revive the Pattani *kris*, or the search for and reproduction of ancient technologies, were projects carried out by Thai academics (in collaboration with local villagers) and were funded by the Thailand Research Fund, which is a Thai government agency. It was represented in the Thai academic community as the local culture of the Thai state. There is no context for a Pattani state independent of Thai political authority, either in the past or in the future. I believe that the separatist organizations do dream of an independent Pattani state, or at least one free of the 'oppression' of the Thai state. But these organizations, and especially the militants, have only a vague idea of this fantasy.<sup>26</sup>

The observation, then, that the rebels in the south have an idealized, almost utopian vision for which they are struggling as their motive, identifies the uprising as *millenarian* in nature. Furthermore, Nihdi sees no basis in historical or political reality for the vision of a rebirth of Pattani, and illustrates that any harkening to an earlier era and to the glories of the past, have in fact been facilitated by the Thai government and are not organic to Malay Muslim sensibilities.

Similarly, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, in his most recent work on the subject of the Malay Muslimisms, sees the Kreu-Se Mosque, rather than a symbol, as a complex "theater" for the renegotiation of Muslim Malay identity in the region, and by extension in Thailand itself. He cites as evidence its symbolic power as a totem of Islamic dissatisfaction in direct conflict with its role in tourism in the south (it has been promoted as a tourist site for Malays), its presence in historical myth-creation (a powerful association with the shrine of Lim Khun Yew), and its role as a place of Islamic worship. Chaiwat concludes that the Kreu-Se Mosque is important because it is one of a series of theaters in which "the politics of identity renegotiation would continue to be more relevant to an understanding of a Muslim minority's relation to changing circumstances than the official politics of conspiratorial actors and clandestine foreign intervention."<sup>27</sup>

The violence in the south, then, may be seen in this context less as an armed resistance underwritten by complex Islamic ideals, and more as a simple peasants' revolt aimed at seeking economic redress for their

condition. But, qualitatively, how different is the Muslim vision of the former glory of the Sultanate of Patani from the reified vision of Thai unity (reflected within hegemonic policy formation) espoused throughout the kingdom? Whatever the case, it is certain that the violence in the south has long term repercussions for the Thai political establishment and for the citizenry as a whole. Images of tortured Muslims do little to win the good will of the international community and do far less for the image of Thailand as a powerful member nation of ASEAN, with a diversified population that has been developing its economy and infrastructure to establish critical links to facilitate international commerce.

### Thai Muslim Violence in Global Perspective

Scholars who study terrorism and modern political science have become more concerned that the violence in the south is increasingly the result of connections to external Islamic extremist groups from other parts of the world. However, for the most part, these fears seem to be groundless. What has been significant is the international attention that the violence in the south has attracted, generally the result of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's aggressive stance toward the rebellious provinces. The pattern of action and reaction, established by the military and propagated and supported by official Thai government policy, has served to exacerbate tensions and to draw parallels with conflict elsewhere in the world where Muslims are involved in military conflict.

The danger is that the distinctions that have kept this conflict localized for centuries, i.e., that the Malay Muslims merely had wanted to go about daily life maintaining connections to their cultural heritage, are rendered less clear by the power of multinational and international media, which typically show localized conflicts in terms of larger paradigms by reducing them to their minimal constituent parts, e.g., Muslim terrorists versus Buddhists. In particular, the Muslim rebellion in the south becomes a battle in a greater war that has more recently become the focus of so much international attention.

In addition to some evidence that PULO has had international cooperation from groups in the Middle East, Andrew Tan writes that external influence and aid

on behalf of the Malay Muslims in the south is indeed part of the picture. He writes, "An external element is present in three forms. The first is the sympathy from co-religionists in neighboring Malaysia. The second is the link with other Muslim secessionists in the region. The third is the most worrying of all – potential links with international militant Islam."<sup>28</sup> While indeed worrying, the third and final aspect of Tan's analysis of external influence might really be seen as a symptom of the Thai government's military policies directed against its Muslim minority. The greater the reaction to Muslim displays of political discontent, the greater the probability that international focus will shift toward Thailand's troubled provinces.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show the ways in which Thai national identity has historically been reified and applied to its minority Muslim population, as well as the constituents that comprise it. The theoretical components of national identity have also been applied to Thailand's understanding and vision of itself in nationalistic terms. Relative to notions of "Thainess" this paper has included an analysis of the Malay Muslim minority in the southern provinces and the rebellion that has simmered for centuries.

The result of this rebellion, which some scholars characterize as millenarian in nature, and others see as an irredentist, or a unique combination of both, has been increasing political attention directed at the former Thaksin Shinawatra administration. This administration won its reelection bid in an historical first for the country since becoming a constitutional monarchy: a four year completion of an elected coalition government with a subsequent reelection of an incumbent. The results of the second term mandate revealed in part that the heavy-handed responses to rebellion in the south and the expressions of political discontent there, had not, in general, affected the opinion of his Thai Buddhist constituency, which tended to see the conflict as a problem created by the Muslims, rather than by the Thai government.

More recently, the domestic political situation in Thailand has shown marked signs of fatigue if not exasperation resulting in a swift and complete military coup on September 19, 2006, while instability in the southern provinces continues with incidents of spo-

radic violence. The overthrow of Thaksin Shinawatra by the Thai military clearly obviated a protracted period of instability in the Thai polity. While Shinawatra's political crisis was ostensibly the result of allegations of corruption involving the liquidation of his investment holdings through a shell company based in Singapore, it could be concluded that these political tensions had the seed of popular discontent within the Muslim soil of the south. Whatever policies the Thai military government now pursues in its restive southern provinces in the short term, the issues underlying the complexities of Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim relations are likely to remain unchanged.

I have argued that the fundamental problem has been a seemingly incomprehensible insistence on Thai educational and language requirements enforced by official Thai policy that separates the Malay Muslims from their historical and cultural traditions and forces them to either accommodate a completely alien culture, or to seek linkages with the "imagined" and "globalized" Islamic community beyond the borders of Thailand. In addition, the political dissatisfaction of the Malay Muslims stems from the lack of viable opportunities to participate in an economy dominated by the needs and requisites of urban Thailand.

While it seems unlikely that there are any real international agitators fueling the rebellion in the south, and even less likely that Islam is the primary cause for disparities of wealth, or that it provides the sole ideological foundation for the rebellion, there are real and growing international concerns that Thailand's regional rebellion may attract transnational actors who see this conflict simply as a skirmish in a greater global "War on Terror." The real dilemma for the previous political administration had been containing the unrest in the south before the increasingly desperate insurgents began to seek targets further north for their political expressions of resentment. That this is occurring now, with crude explosive devices used as bargaining chips in the ever-escalating conflict, demonstrates the inherent weaknesses and risks when transnational ideologies inform localized conflicts, but are countered by aggressive, nationalistic reactions with strong military support. It demonstrates, too, the blurring distinctions between global and local theaters of political expression.

For the year 2005, the United States State Department issued a report on the status of human rights

throughout the world. The controversial report, which posits fundamental human rights as a desirable goal in keeping with US policy objectives in disparate regions throughout the world, includes a separate, highly detailed report for Thailand alone. In this report<sup>29</sup> the State Department warns against "growing resentment" in the southern provinces and details the human rights abuses that have resulted from the "Emergency Decree" that had authorized military suppression of the rebellion. The list of disappearances, extrajudicial killings in the south and elsewhere, and acts of violence in the region are disheartening indications that identity politics remain a fundamental problem in Thailand's political constructions, as are the passages in this report that detail the deliberate targeting of Thai Buddhists still living in the south and attempting to observe their own traditions.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, there are two naming conventions of the Thai city and province of Pattani. In historical accounts, these variations are sometimes interchangeable. However, references to "Patani" in this paper stress the historical connection to the Malay Sultanate of that name with its Malay spelling, thus distinguishing the modern Thai spelling of the province, which would be Romanized properly with two "p"s. Historians and writers who choose to use the single "t" in descriptions that refer to the modern city or province (and are contemporary accounts) thus ignore Central Thai administrative convention. Where the references occur in citations, they retain the author's choice.

<sup>2</sup> Thailand is administratively divided into 76 *jangwat* (provinces), then subdivided into *ampoe* which are functionally similar to the county/parish system in the United States. *Ampoe* are then further divided according to administrative units called *tambon* and, one level further, *mubaan* (village) resulting in a complex yet centralized political system.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/th.html>

<sup>4</sup> David Wyatt, *A Short History of Thailand* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso), 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Andaya, "The Making of a Tributary State: Siam and Terengganu in the Eighteenth Century" in *Anuson Walter Vella*, (Honolulu: Southeast Asia Papers, 1986), p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Wyatt, p. 202-203.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, chapter 6.

<sup>11</sup> Moshe, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> Wyatt, p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Annette Hamilton, "TV on the Border: Broadcasting and Malay Identity in Southern Thailand" in *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, Vol. 34, Number 1, 2000, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Chaiwat Satha-Anand. "The Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict: The World According to the Thai Muslims" in *Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict* edited by K.M. de Silva and R.J. May (London: Printer Publishers, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> See Anderson, p. 124-125.

<sup>20</sup> Thai term for socioeconomic development policy

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Scupin "Education and Development for Muslims in Thailand" in *Aspects of Development: Islamic Education in Thailand and Malaysia* edited by Scupin (Malaysia: Institute of Malay Language, Literature and Culture, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1989), p. 108-109. See also Pitsuwan (1985) cited in Scupin.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 116-117.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Tan "The Persistence of Armed Muslim Rebellion in Southeast Asia: Implications after September 11," in *Globalisation and the New Terror: The Asia Pacific Dimension*, ed. David Martin Jones (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2004), p. 222-223.

<sup>24</sup> Nidhi Aeusrivongse "Understanding the Situation in the South as a 'Millenarian Revolt'" in the *Kyoto Review*, March 2005, downloaded at [http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue5/article\\_380.html](http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue5/article_380.html)

<sup>25</sup> Information detailing these more recent events is widely available in the archives of international news sites, e.g., <http://www.bbc.com>, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Nidhi Aeusrivongse, *Kyoto Review*, March 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Chaiwat Satha-Anand. *The Life of this World: Negotiated Muslim Lives in Thai Society*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International Private Limited, 2005), p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Tan, p. 224.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61628.htm> downloaded March, 2006.